

## PERSPECTIVES OF ROHINTON MISTRY IN THE DIASPORIC CONTEXT

**Kavyashree Vijaylaxmi Gadag**  
Research Scholar,  
Rani Channamma  
University Belgavi

### Abstract

Among the leading Parsi writers, Rohinton Mistry pays more attention to the portrayal of his own community and his fictional works are replete with numerous details of Parsi life culture and religion. Like all other Parsi writers, Mistry is anxious for the preservation of the ethnic identity of his community. He presents his community through the different narratives of his characters who consistently express their concerns for the community and the changes that affect it. By focusing on their community in their narratives, they preserve and protect themselves and thus throw light on the existing reality. For this reason, he attempts to record the story of the Parsi community and their ancient Zoroastrian faith. Thus, his works may truly be regarded as a commentary on the domestic and social life of Parsis. It explores an authentic account of their religion, rituals, customs & manners, their fire – temples, priests, towers of silence and even their cuisine. All his works – *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, *Such A Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters* present the exhaustive and true account of the Parsi community and their dynamic nature. Craig Tapping (1992) has offered an excellent synopsis of *Tales from Firozsha Baag's* aims and themes. He says that it is, 'an exemplary postmodern, postcolonial literary collection. It stages the translation of oral cultures into literature with a commentary on the traditional society from which such practices derive; it reflects on textuality and on the growing consciousness and literary abilities of its protagonist author, it mocks well-meaning Anglo-Saxon liberalism through satire; and it appropriates the inherited narratives of the imperial canon in parody which opens our understanding of such figural systems.' (45)

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*Lend Me Your Light* deals with alienation, too. The Parsis Jamshed, Percy and his brother Kersi are close friends until Kersi and Jamshed immigrate to North America. While Jamshed goes to the US, Kersi immigrates to Canada. Life in India, America, or Canada puts into question the characters' approach towards cultural difference as a marker of identity that can either be rejected, or accepted, or result in uncertainty as to how to lead one's life in a diaspora situation. The story considers in depth the question of the ethnic identity of immigrants and depicts the problems encountered by the Indian diaspora and sense of displacement and uprootedness by contrasting the lives of the two friends – Jamshed and Kersi. While Squatter tells the story of a character who attempts to erase his Indian identity in order to assimilate, *Lend Me Your Light* focuses on a broader spectrum of ways to act in a new land. In short, *Lend Me Your Light* focuses on a continuum of three ways of coping with difference. In the words of Ajay Heble (1993):

Jamshed, who, scornful of his native India, leaves for the Promised Land of America, and Percy, who adamantly stays in India to help villagers in their fight against exploitation, the story finds its focus in Kersi, the narrator, who comes to represent the struggle between the two extreme positions. (57)

Jamshed who is having very high ambitions, dreams of a dazzling future and material success, hates India and decides to migrate to America. He declares that one day he is going abroad to escape from the clutches of corruption in this country. For him Bombay is horrible, dirtier than ever. Percy Boyce leaves Bombay to work for the uplift of farmers in rural India. Percy's brother Kersi, the narrator and the protagonist of the story, who migrates to Canada, seems to bind the two extreme positions. (Roy, 2001:17) That Jamshed assimilates to America easily is not surprising once it is taken into account that he is already alienated from India while living there. For Jamshed India is a backwards country ridden by corruption and crime and unable to change for the better. It is his passion that the problems of India are tied up with the so-called "ghati mentality" of country:

In the particular version of reality we inherited, ghatis were always flooding places, they never just went there. Ghatis were flooding the banks, desecrating the sanctity of institutions, and taking up all the coveted jobs. Ghatis were even flooding the colleges and universities, a thing unheard of. Wherever you turned, the bloody ghatis were flooding the place. (176)

When Jamshed talks regarding ghatis, i.e. about the members of a lower caste, the bedlam associated with them hints at his obsessed fear of an ensuing class struggle. The water imagery, so aptly ironised by Kersi above, suggests that the upper-class Jamshed links the social Other with a lumped working class target on depriving him of his riches. In much the same way as the individual is drowned in the mass, those who are well-off are threatened by lower castes/the working class. In that light, it is possible to argue that Jamshed accommodates to America so smoothly because the difference that he is afraid of is caste/class rather than race or culture. While caste/class is unmarked within US multiculturalism, it is money that enables him to assimilate to a capitalist America.

While Jamshed is still thinking about 'ghati mentalities' as an adult, both Kersi and Percy, on growing up, cease to be included in his complaints. The different development of the three of them with respect to their view points on caste is telling in its irony. While Jamshed continuously blames India of its backwardness, the story reveals that he has not matured as a person and thereby suggests that it is not India that is outside of time, progress etc. but he himself. While Kersi sees through the arrogance of Jamshed's rhetoric in retrospect but fails to act, it is Percy who commits himself to challenging social injustice within India. Percy, as a

character that remains behind and does not emigrate, implicitly testifies to the fact that India is not eternally depraved and corrupt but that things in India can be changed. Fighting the rural system of money-lending, Percy Boyce is not only the most audacious character in the story but also the one who practices the solidarity towards his fellow human beings suggested in the story's epitaph by Tagore: "... your lights are all lit – then where do you go with your lamp? My house is all dark and lonesome, - lend me your light" (173).

Both Jamshed and Percy want to remove differences in their lives but they constitute them differently. While for the capitalist Jamshed it is America that overrides ethnic as well as caste/class difference, the Marxist Percy works towards ameliorating the social inequities within India and thus actively fights social and class difference. Put differently, for Jamshed money and capitalism constitutes sameness, for Percy (as well as for Tagore) humanity is the central bond between individuals.

The clash between Jamshed's skepticism and Percy's optimism is mirrored in the conflict of ethics within Kersi. The protagonist and narrator of *Lend Me Your Light* experiences migration and diaspora as sources of guilt, which become evident in two ways. Comparing his situation to that of his brother, he reflects with a bad conscience:

"There you were, my brother, waging battles against corruption and evil, while I was watching sitcoms on my rented Granada TV" (184).

Kersi's immigration has resulted in alienation from his brother, whose activism differentiates favorably with Kersi's inability. Apart from a bad conscience due to his passivity, Kersi also experiences a feeling of guilt towards the culture he has left behind far. He puts a lot of efforts to recover the culture he has left behind prove to be disappointing. We observe Kersi in the middle of a process of adaptation. He lacks the distance to India in order to come to terms with what he has left behind. The result is that "Kersi inhabits the ambivalent space between cultures." (Hable, 1993: 57) He is in-between cultures, a situation he does not experience as liberating but as crippling: 'Kersi sees his hybridized identity as the site of a struggle between opposing sets of cultural values.' (Hable, 1993: 58) Utterly, he is in need of a Nariman ordering his life for him and turning the chaos of migration and diaspora into a rational story. That the diaspora does not suggest Kersi a new vision but constitutes a serious handicap is also underlined by the story's intertextual reference to Greek mythology. Before leaving for Toronto, Kersi, suffering from conjunctivitis, likens himself to the blind seer Tiresias: "I, Tiresias, blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the one to come in Toronto" (180). The future tense with which Canada is associated allows the conclusion that Kersi does still anticipate for a hybrid identity that would permit him to selectively draw on the best of several worlds. At the end of the story, however, the tone of his discourse has become more pessimistic and notably bleaker. Eventually, Kersi characterizes himself in the following way: "I Tiresias, throbbing between two lives, humbled by the ambiguities and dichotomies confronting me" (192). The story's intertextuality reflects Kersi's failure to adapt and to cope with a fundamental conflict of values in the new land (Canadian diaspora). While the first of the two references to Greek mythology framing *Lend Me Your Light* still speaks of hope, the latter quotation merely registers that hopes have been thwarted.

As far as criticism has disregarded that Mistry does not quote Greek mythology directly. In *Lend Me Your Light* the reference of intertexts is mediated and thus acquires additional complexity. It is important to realise that Rohinton Mistry alludes to Greek mythology by taking recourse to T.S. Eliot who in the third section of *The Waste Land* has Tiresias speak the following words:

I, Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives, Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see. At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea... (Eliot, 1998: 62-3).

Mentioning Eliot, Mistry draws Kersi's comparison to the ancient seer as inadequate. Kersi is no second Tiresias because his transitory blindness does not result in a new kind of vision that would enable him to envisage the future. Although Kersi Boyce may lead two lives, the result is not a double vision but schizophrenia, failure to adapt and, in fact, blindness. As a man temporarily displaying characteristics of both sexes as well as moving between the world and the underworld, Eliot's Tiresias is a man of the in-between who has received the gift of prophecy as compensation for the blindness he has been struck with. In fact, his hybridity is so valuable for the gods that they endow him with the ability to see into the future. Kersi on the other hand, merely suffers from his hybridity in the mundane, post-religious sphere of the diaspora. He cannot make out the sailor coming home (i.e. Ulysses) whom Tiresias in Eliot's poem speaks of, for he himself is on an Odyssee, i.e. sentenced to wander the earth in search of a home. Kersi's failure to perceive the sailor is a failure to evaluate his situation in Canada as someone who is essentially homeless. ( Leckie, 1996: 31)

In the context of the story's intertextuality, the symbolism of *Lend me Your Light* also acquires an additional layer of meaning. For the light imagery of *Lend Me Your Light* does not only allude to Jamshed's moral darkness juxtaposed to Percy's qualities as light bringer; *Lend Me Your Light* also employs light imagery to underline its concern with vision and seeing. Thus the request for light signaled by the title is not only a demand for solidarity and humanism but also a desire and a will to truth. While the homeland in *Lend Me Your Light* grants Percy the satisfaction of finding meaning in life by helping others with a "non-usurious lending of light" (Malak, 1988: 194) the diaspora does not allow the migrant Kersi the 'insight' needed to come to terms with his hybrid existence: No "lucidity of thought", no "clearness with which to look at things" (186), "the epiphany would have to wait for another time" (192). How Kersi eventually arrives at an epiphany that sheds light on how an acceptable Canadian identity might be envisaged, is detailed by Mistry in *Swimming Lessons*, the final and most interesting story of his collection.

Kersi is alienated from all things Indian and his fascination is with all things foreign. To him, expatriation is painful, going through complex process involving severing ties with his homeland. Though the "Chosen Land", promises prosperity and success, his inner self remains chaotic. Kersi and Jamshed represent the typical immigrant psyche. They are caught between the two worlds – the one they have forsaken and the other which had failed them despite initial promises. Their inability to find happiness in the chosen land and the inability to discard the old world leads to tension.

Jamshed is symbolic of one side of the Indian diaspora, who do not feel alienated in an alien land. He gets completely merged in American culture and adopts its values. He thinks that the people in US and Canada do not possess the 'ghati' (persons who live in Western Ghats) mentality, like people in India. He believes that being an American or a Canadian is better than being an Indian. Thus, Jamshed views his native land with resentment. He seems to have forgotten his ethnic past and indigenous culture and is an example of total assimilation in the West. He fully identifies himself with the American melting pot and decries everything of the past.

Kersi, the protagonist, is seen as a lost and lonely person in the midst of his new setting even among or especially among other Parsis in Toronto. Their airs and opinions sicken him;

they speak mockingly of India and Indians; they adopt the manner of rich tourists when they pay special visit to India. Kersi looks at his native land with adequate detachment. His quest in Canada is for an identity that helps him to identify himself in “Chosen Land”. Kersi feels to be in the middle of the process of assimilation. He is in conflict in choosing his identity. The end result is that Kersi feels that he has two identities: Indian and Western. At the closing of the story, *Swimming Lessons*, the narrator, a young writer, observes an old man in his Toronto apartment block staring mutely at the flakes of snow falling outside. He muses:

What thoughts is he thinking as he watches them? Of childhood days, perhaps, and snowmen with hats and pipes, and snowball fights, and white Christmases, and Christmas trees? What will I think of, old in this country, when I sit and watch the snow come down? ... my snowmen and snowball fights and Christmas trees are in the pages of Enid Blyton’s books, dispersed amidst the adventures of the Famous Five, and the Five Find-Outers, and the Secret Seven. My snowflakes are even less forgettable than the old man’s, for they never melt. (244)

This redolent passage captures the poignant enigma of the displacement forged in one culture and location but indebted to grapple in language with the everyday realities of another. It is appealing to see reflected here the position of its author, Mistry, born in Bombay, now resident in Canada, but continually prowling the cupboards of memory for the dusty but overt remnants of the India he has left behind. Hitherto the last sentence also suggests an increased intensity to the experiences of a childhood stretched by space as well as time: as if the migrant writer is empowered by that very geographical separation to fashion images with the sharpness of cut crystal, which will throw a new, diffused light on the familiarities of ‘home’, as well as on the eccentricities of elsewhere. Mistry’s work as a whole, with its repeated image of journeys of different kinds, combines ‘the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to nation of a place.

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